

Texas Lawyer

GRANT PROVIDES FUNDING TO CONNECT LEGAL AID CALL CENTERS

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A \$100,000 technology grant awarded to Texas Rural Legal Aid will fund an Austin call center and connect it with centers in San Antonio and Corpus Christi to assist the poor with legal problems in a 68-county area of Southwest Texas. Washington, D.C.-based Legal Services Corp., which oversees federally funded legal aid, awarded the grant to TRLA, which serves an area extending from Austin south to the Rio Grande Valley and west to El Paso. The award was announced at a news conference on Aug. 30 at the University of Texas School of Law, which is participating in the project.

According to LSC, only 20 percent of the low-income Texans who have a civil legal problem are able to obtain attorneys to represent them.

"It's a serious problem when four out of five low-income people in Texas arrive at the courthouse door and essentially discover they cannot afford the price of admission," says Mauricio Vivero, LSC vice president. "While this grant cannot ensure justice for all in Southwest Texas, this new legal advice line will mean thousands more families can access critical legal advice when they need it the most."

TRLA executive director David Hall says the call-in service is more than a hotline for legal advice. UT law students will staff the center and conduct the initial interviews with clients to find out what their legal problems are and how they can be helped.

"It provides the front end for the lawyers in dealing with the clients," Hall says. The idea, Hall says, is to keep attorneys off the phones so that they can spend their time handling cases. Hall says that the students will do eligibility screening to determine whether callers qualify for legal assistance from TRLA. If a caller meets TRLA's eligibility requirements, a comprehensive case work-up will be done by a student, who may have to call a courthouse to get records on the case, he says.

"What you normally think of a hotline doing is spending about 15 minutes on the phone with somebody, giving them some quick legal advice, hanging up the phone and going to the next light blinking on the panel," Hall says. "The way we try to approach it is to identify every legal problem that a client has."

All the information and records that a student obtains are filed in a computer system accessible by TRLA's attorneys throughout its service area, Hall says.

This won't be the first time that TRLA has used law students to take calls from indigents. The Austin center will expand services provided by the Telephone Access to Justice call

center in San Antonio, where St. Mary's University School of Law students man the phones.

Hall says the San Antonio center -- opened as an experiment about five years ago -- has made "a tremendous difference in our ability to reach out" to clients, whether they are in rural or urban areas. TRLA also operates a small call-in center in Corpus Christi, where paralegals take the calls, he says. With funding from the grant, the three centers will be tied together in an integrated phone system, he adds.

Mary Christine Reed, TAJ attorney and director, says the San Antonio Center opened about 5,000 client files stemming from calls received in 2001. The goal of the Austin center, which is expected to open by January 2003, is to double the number of people served, Hall says.

Law students who work at the San Antonio center are given an opportunity to use their legal skills. Depending on the amount of training they have, students can dispense preliminary legal advice to clients but must document what advice they gave, Reed says. Reed says students also are called to assist clients in rural areas with pro se divorces for cases that she determines can be handled in that manner. The students talk to the clients on the phone to get the information on divorce cases and prepare the pleadings, which are reviewed by attorneys before being given to clients to take to court, she says.

"We follow that client through to filing it, to getting the final hearing, to preparing the final decree, to making sure she gets divorced," Reed says.

Reed says privilege attaches when the law students take calls.

"They're working basically as a paralegal or legal assistant," she says. "It's the same as calling and speaking to a lawyer."

Reed says the San Antonio center fields calls on a number of legal problems. About 20 percent of the callers are victims of domestic violence who are given information about shelters where they can find help, she says.

Calls also come from people who have been denied food stamps or have problems with their landlords, she says.

Hall says that about 20 UT law students will be needed to answer calls at the new center in Austin.

The indigents served by the center won't be the only ones to benefit. William Powers, UT law school dean, says the project will benefit the students who participate, teaching them early in their careers about the need for pro bono service.

Says Powers, "This grant will help provide our students with valuable professional

experience that will help them in whatever areas they go into, but will also help them understand and have the ideals of providing legal services to every citizen of the state."